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## Conservation

### Pledge

I give my  
pledge as an American  
to save and faithfully to  
defend from waste the  
natural resources of  
my country—its soil  
and minerals, its  
forests, waters  
and wildlife

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The 1967 Louisiana wild turkey season opens April 1 and continues through April 23. There is growing interest in wild turkey hunting in the state for two important reasons. One is that the wild turkey is North America's largest game bird and the other is that a restocking program being carried out by the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission has greatly extended the range where turkeys were once present but depleted through over-hunting. As the program continues, the Commission hopes to establish flocks in every area of the state where there is suitable range.  
Photo by Bob Dennie

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# What Later... ...Mr Gator

**Robert H. Chabreck and Ted O'Neil**

OVER THE PAST two decades the Wildlife Departments of all southeastern states have made great efforts to place the various species under sound management. These efforts have been very rewarding in most instances. White-tailed deer have been established in huntable numbers throughout all states. Also, Mourning Doves enjoy a good population status with liberal seasons and bag limits.

However, the picture is not all rosy. Several species have gone downward during this period, in spite of efforts to build them up. The alligator is a classical example of this in Louisiana. Over the years the alligator has declined to the point where the animal is practically non-existent over its original range.

Historians report that during the 19th century alligators were abundant in all marshes, swamps, rivers, lakes and sloughs in Louisiana. It was not until the latter part of that century did a market develop for alligator skins, and in the beginning only skins over 8 feet long were acceptable. Yet, interest in hunting the reptiles was high and E. A. McIlhenny of Avery Island estimated that 3 million were harvested in Louisiana between 1880 and 1933. Tax records of the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission show further that 314,404 alligator skins were sold in the state from 1939 to 1955.

The harvest from 1939 to 1955 averaged about 20,000 animals per year, which on today's market would be valued at \$600,000 annually. Such an income today would provide incentive to landowners to improve the marshes and maintain the wetland habitat required by alligators.

The great beauty and high quality of alligator skins for wearing apparel has elevated these products to the position of status symbols, not only in the U. S. but also in other countries. The beauty of the North American alligator has been further enhanced by improved dressing techniques in recent years.

Aside from the market on alligator skins, the reptiles have other values that make them a valuable asset to Louisiana. The aesthetic value is probably far reaching and equal to the overall other values. Catching a glimpse of a large alligator sunning on a bayou bank on a spring day is a scene that no one will soon forget. In fact the monetary value of this animal as a tourist

attraction to the state has been estimated at over \$1,000,000.

In spite of the importance of the alligator no action was taken until 1960 to restrict the indiscriminate killing of the reptiles along the Louisiana Coast. At that time the State Legislature passed laws prohibiting the killing of alligators less than 5 feet long and gave to the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission authority to establish seasons and specify areas and methods for taking the animals.

In 1963 the Commission closed the season on alligators and made it illegal to kill or molest alligators anywhere in the state. The only persons allowed to have alligators or alligator skins in their possession were licensed alligator breeders or skin buyers who could prove that the skins were from out-of-state.

The alligator population in the state declined about 90 per cent from the late 1940's to the late 1950's. If the Legislative action of 1960 to



Bob Chabreck and Ted Joanen weigh and mark a young gator to be released in a research area at the Rockefeller refuge.



restrict the killing of alligators and place them under responsible management had been taken 10 years earlier the task would have been much simpler. By 1960 not even a basic breeding population was present in many of the state's swamps and marsh areas.

After 1960 the Commission permitted only a 60-day spring season, with the 5-foot size limit in effect. This season was held with hopes that these restrictions would be adequate for rebuilding the population. Also, the industrial demand for alligator skins was very great and the Commission tried to provide enough alligators to keep the industry going, yet leave a surplus each year to gradually rebuild the population.

By 1963 it was obvious that the restricted season was not the answer, since during that time the alligator population showed no increase. Also, outlaws used the 60-day season to dispose of alligator skins taken illegally during the remainder of the year. Having no alternative the Commission closed the season and intensified enforcement activities.

The closed season limited the supply of alligator skins to the market, and with the increased demand, price increases followed. In fact the price increase was so great that many hunters and buyers continued operating, knowing that they were violating the law as well as harming the resource.

Most violators felt that the fines charged by certain courts were so small they could continue hunting, even at the risk of being arrested by game agents. Very often the violator could pay a fine with the proceeds from less than a day's work. Not until the courts raised the fines and gave jail sentences did the full effect of the enforcement effort begin to show.

In certain parishes the picture has changed and the alligator is making a strong comeback and within a few years may again be an

important part of the local fauna. However, in other areas the scene is very gloomy. The heavy illegal kill continues, in spite of efforts by game agents. And with the illegal kill alligator populations decrease.

Where do we go from here? That's the big question now. We know very well how to rebuild alligator population, because we have seen it demonstrated so clearly in certain areas. We know that progress has been made in the past few years, but we must be persistent to make sure that it continues.

Additional legislation is badly needed to fill certain loop-holes in existing laws. It is essential that federal laws be passed or amended to prohibit the unauthorized transporting of alligators or alligator skins from state to state. Also, state laws are needed to strengthen the position of landowners managing marshes for alligators. The landowner should benefit from future alligator seasons through special alligator tagging systems or licenses.

There is considerable interest at present in alligator farming. However, sufficient evidence is not yet available to prove that the reptiles can be raised in pens on an economically sound basis. Nevertheless, experiments now underway by the Commission show favorable results. If suitable alligator farming practices can be perfected, then a supply of skins to meet the industrial demand can be produced by these means.

One intriguing thought that occurs regarding pen-reared alligators is of the great success of the mink rancher. Louisiana is a leading wild mink producing state and each year the catch ranges from 40,000 to 80,000 wild pelts on a total of 30 million acres. However, several of the larger ranchers can produce this many ranch mink alone on only a few hundred acres. While alligators may not be an exact parallel to mink, the idea remains and should be considered fully.

More information is also needed on the habits and basic requirements of alligators. Louisiana has lead the nation in alligator research over the past 10 years, yet much remains unknown. A continuation of this research work is essential with special emphasis in the future placed on determining habitat requirements and ecology of the reptiles. As the wetland habitat continues to give way to agriculture and industry, more intensive management of that remaining will determine what's next for the alligator.

Enforcement will be as important in the future as it has been in the past. Without adequate enforcement, laws and regulations are useless. Whenever the welfare of a resource is at hand, most people are honest enough to abide by laws set up to protect the resource. However, a few people are not and without adequate enforcement, by the courts as well as game agents, this small segment of violators will continue to operate. Then in reality all you will have is a private hunting club for the lawless element. Therefore, in deciding what's next for the alligator the importance of a rigid, well-coordinated enforcement program must be emphasized. \*



This large breeding alligator is being readied for transport to a marsh area where gators are scarce.